

Michigan Regional Skills AlliancesSM

Report on Site Visits Made to the Original Grantees Prepared for Participants

May 16, 2007

Site Visit Report

Background:

Between late December 2006 and mid-February 2007, staff from the MiRSAs met with conveners, partners, and employers from the original 12 MiRSAs. The purpose was primarily to see how the MiRSA initiative was working from the grantees point of view, look for ways the state can better support existing MiRSAs, and listen to any suggestions for future grantees.

There were no issues that ‘jumped out’ of the meetings as being an area that needed immediate attention, or of collective concern. The majority of MiRSAs are satisfied with the assistance they have received from the state.

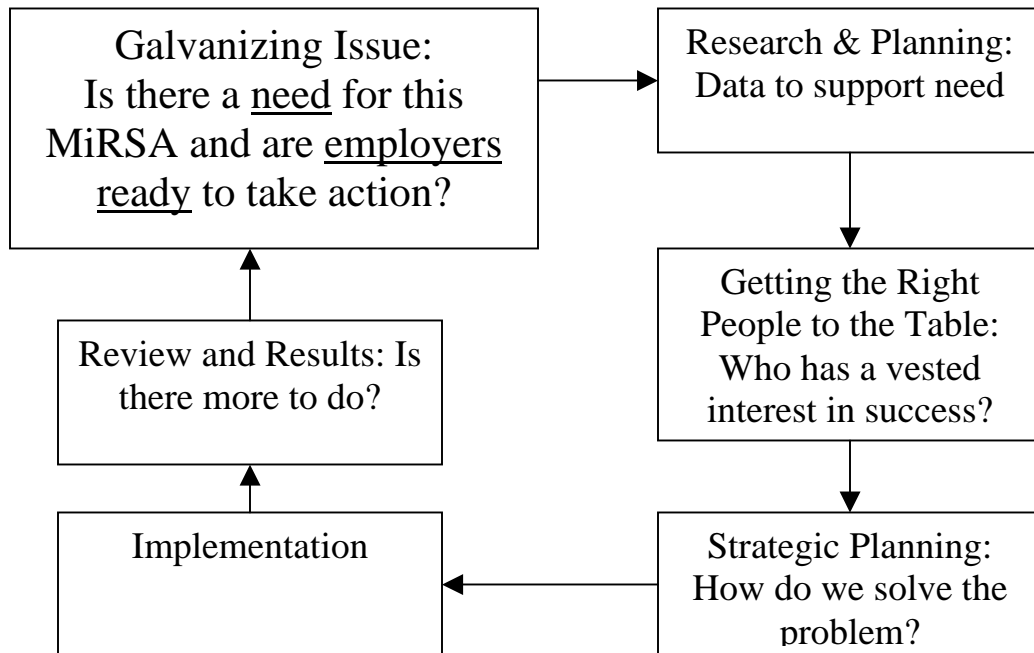
General Comments on the Visits

The interview team approached each meeting with a list of potential questions that were used as a guide. The only commonality between the meetings was the lack of commonality. In some cases, meetings were conducted one-on-one with a dedicated convener or employer, and two MiRSA staff. Others had a mix of conveners, partners, and employers, or multiple conveners, or multiple employers. On some of the visits the participants were trying to "sell" their success, and were not clear on the purpose of the meeting. Indifferent to staff assuring otherwise, some believed they were being rated. The majority of participants though, expressed appreciation that their input on the program was important.

It was recognized through the site visits, and during subsequent discussions among staff, that MiRSAs seem to go through a development cycle. There are also specific circumstances that contribute to the success of a MiRSA. There were programmatic issues brought out through the meetings, and during follow-up discussions. Each of these areas is addressed in detail in the remainder of this report.

Phases of MiRSA Development

There are several distinct phases that MiRSAs appear to go through. Two factors in the initial phase, to a great extent, determine the potential for future success: Is there a need for the MiRSA? Are employers ready to take action? Without a ‘yes’ to both questions the MiRSA will be off to a rocky start. In the approximately three years since formally becoming MiRSAs, successful MiRSAs seem to have cycled through six phases.



Traits of Successful MiRSAs

There are several traits that successful MiRSAs seem to have in common. The first is that they were formed after identifying a “**galvanizing issue**.” In many of the MiRSAs, that are functioning the best, there was an issue that brought a group together prior to applying for the grant. In general, this group was meeting on an ad hoc basis grappling with a specific workforce issue. In these circumstances the **grant acted as a catalyst**. The grant supplied funding that was key to an **early success**, or allowed the convener to hire or reassign staff to move the project forward faster. Early successes are very important, they seem to help keep partners motivated, and provide the group a sense of cohesiveness.

The majority of successful MiRSA have had, at a point early on, an **employer champion**. Generally this is one **person**, who represents a substantial employer in the sector and area. They clearly understand the issue, and are willing to articulate it to their peers. Although it is extremely important to have the support of large local employers, it is not enough to have them in name only - they must participate. Having the right people at the table, and **depth** of employer participation (employers assigning strategic people from their organization depending on the task) is another key. For example, the CEO may be the primary contact for the organization, but other specialties such as human resource or marketing staff participates when necessary.

The convener has to **add value**. In several successful MiRSAs the assigned staff person is not an expert in the field. They bring value by adding expertise and a personal network that compliments that of the employers. For example, a convener may bring expertise in grant management, or have experience with working with the local or state government - areas where employers may lack experience or not care to spend their time. This is also reflected in their ability to find ways to leverage funds from various sources such as foundations and state and federal programs. In very few MiRSAs is there a convener with both recognized industry expertise, and a well-developed personal network.

A dedicated staff person (full or part-time) is an important part of a MiRSAs success, but more important is the staffs' **dedication to the project**. Several successful MiRSAs employ part-time individuals with a deep-rooted desire to make the MiRSA work. Their rapport with employers seems to make them more successful at drawing in new partners.

There is not a clear-cut structure that works for all MiRSAs. Successful MiRSAs seem to employ a **flexible structure** that allows them to best serve employers. They tend to meet as needed, and where needed. They do not hold meetings for the sake of holding a meeting. MiRSAs that cover a large territory may move around the region, conduct smaller regional meetings, or use teleconferencing (although face-to-face is preferred). The flexibility also translates into the way they address projects, and their work plans. Many successful MiRSAs have modified tactics without changing long-term goals - usually as a direct response to a change in circumstances or opportunity. MiRSA participation in the Accelerated Healthcare Training Initiative is an example.

Employer participants in successful MiRSAs seem to have a strong **understanding of the concept** – they “get it.” They may or may not know they are part of a MiRSA, but they do know they are part of a collaborative group that is accomplishing a task that directly benefits them. They understand there is more opportunity by working as a region on some issues. They focus on a workforce issue either in a specific industry or area. The geographic region and labor markets are usually determined by employers or, in some cases, by existing professional alignments – a hospital association region for example.

As the MiRSA matures, **strategic planning** is instrumental in their continued success. Successful MiRSAs seem to be project and goal oriented. They conduct annual strategic planning sessions where very specific and measurable goals for the coming year are agreed to. Each partner knows what their role is and what is expected of them. Successful MiRSA tend not to take on more projects than they could reasonably handle.

Watch Out for Pitfalls

Just as there are traits of successful MiRSAs, there are also things to look out for. The biggest may be intent. Why was the MiRSA formed? As previously mentioned, most successful MiRSAs had identified a workforce issue prior to their forming. Employers participate because there is a direct **real (not perceived) benefit** to them. The lack of a galvanizing issue should be a red flag. In most situations, employers have already been

impacted by the workforce issue or realize they will be soon. **The MiRSA model is not appropriate for all situations.**

Generally, grant funding was a catalyst in successful MiRSAs, but was not the primary reason for forming the MiRSA. A second red flag is using MiRSA grants to fund new staff positions that will have to be self-supporting (create programs that employers will sustain) in the future. Unless there are strong commitments upfront, most successful MiRSAs do not organize around a **“pay for service” model**. Similarly, in almost all successful MiRSAs, they believe they would have continued without grant funding. There were no successful MiRSAs that organized specifically to apply for the grant, and none that followed a rigid set of rules or by-laws.

Successful MiRSAs are focused and tend to set and achieve specific goals. **Broadly defined issues** are a red flag. Employer involvement is based on addressing specific needs that benefit them. Similarly, broadly defined regions can be a red flag. Successful MiRSAs tend to cover regions matching employer labor markets or by existing professional alignments.

All successful MiRSAs have some level of staff support supplied by the convener. A **lack of a dedicated individual** (full or part-time) is another red flag. Generally, the group is not set-up to take on clerical functions or provide the convener leadership previously described. A lack of staff can stretch partners too thin.

Although there is not an identifiable structure that works best for all MiRSAs, there are circumstances that unnecessarily complicate the functioning of MiRSAs. **Multiple conveners** can be a problem. This goes back to the basic principle of MiRSAs being employer led. The convener, like grant money, is a catalyst. Their purpose is primarily to support the MiRSA.

Leadership is a trait of successful MiRSAs. **Lack of clear leadership** is a potential pitfall. Successful MiRSAs tend to have one or more strong employer representatives with the ability to keep the MiRSA moving towards goals. The lack of clear leadership has the opposite effect. The MiRSA tends to be less focused and goal oriented. Another red flag is the lack of a basic understanding of the MiRSA concept by conveners, partners and employers.

The lack of or **weak strategic planning** can be a red flag. Most successful MiRSAs have put a process in place to monitor progress, decide next steps and execute. A potential pitfall of weak strategic planning is stagnation, lack of accomplishing goals, and eventual lack of interest by employers.

Programmatic Issues and Questions:

Funding

The majority of MiRSAs felt the one-year grant period was too short. In MiRSAs that had met to address an issue prior to receiving the grant, this was not as large an issue. In

retrospect, this relates to the identified phases of MiRSA development. These MiRSAs had already substantially passed through the planning stage and were struggling with implementation. The grant was the catalyst that moved the project forward faster. In MiRSAs that did not grow out of an existing relationship the first year was primarily used for planning. When time was running out to spend the grant money, they were forced into implementation. Breaking down the proposals into planning and implementation should be considered.

Several MiRSAs mentioned situations when there is an opportunity or project that the MiRSA did not budget for, but could greatly impact their program. They suggested making grant funds available to existing MiRSAs for specific strategic projects. It was further suggested these could be small awards of \$5k - \$10k, and the MiRSA could use the grant to leverage other funds.

To coincide with the stages of MiRSA development, grants could be awarded for research and planning, implementation, and specific implementation projects for mature MiRSAs. As the cycle continues, existing MiRSAs could apply for planning grants to address new issues.

The majority of MiRSAs felt the lack of restrictions on how to use MiRSA grant money was appropriate. A few felt the state should restrict use. One believed that grant money should only be used for projects and not for staff.

Several MiRSA believe the grant cycle, in particular the time to respond to the grant solicitation, is too short. There were two suggestions to remedy this issue; extend the response time to 8-10 weeks or implement a continuous grant cycle described as, “Just-in-time” MiRSAs.

Restructuring of MiRSAs

As MiRSAs mature, there are several issues that are beginning to surface; existing MiRSAs want to add to or delete geographic area, break-up into separate MiRSAs, take on new industrial sectors or dissolve the association. Each of these situations potentially has funding ramifications. There have been expansions in past funding cycles but clearer direction on how to handle these situations is necessary.

There will be situations where a MiRSA has accomplished their goals, and no longer have a purpose. If this situation occurs and the MiRSA becomes inactive, it does not mean that the MiRSA has failed. Currently, there is no way to account for this situation. If the informal structure and networks setup by the MiRSA remain in tact, even if they no longer meet or report to the state, they are a success and should be recognized.

Measures of Success

The department is currently using predominately traditional workforce program measurements for the MiRSAs initiative (number of individuals trained and placed and the number of partners). This may not accurately reflect the success of the individual MiRSAs, or the program. In the original document, “Michigan Regional Skills

Alliances: A Vision for 2010,” released in May 2005, along with training, were several other expected outcomes. Included were: employers perception of improvement in the Michigan business climate, improved business performance, a better means of connecting the workforce with key industries in a region, and a more coherent and responsive system of workforce and economic development that is valued by employers. Many of these measures are directly related to employers’ perception and performance, and less focused on the workforce side. The existing success measurements should be reviewed and possibly better aligned with the some of the original goals of the initiative.

Sustainability

To varying degrees, sustainability is an issue in all MiRSAs. Individual MiRSAs have addressed funding using several strategies: Contracted consultants through Michigan Works! Agencies (MWAs), a “pay for service” model, employer donations and MWA staff assignment.

Training

There was considerable discussion during the site visits, and ongoing among program staff, regarding the amount of training MiRSAs are involved with. Given the state’s employment rate and job loss, should the MiRSAs be focused on training and if so, should the state change its mandate to reflect this? There are also concerns that the state is not capturing all the training that MiRSAs are part of and what is the best way to capture and report training.

Marketing

Directly or indirectly marketing is an issue in a number of MiRSAs. There seems to be a greater need for broad based “awareness” marketing than for MiRSA specific marketing. Several MiRSAs suggested a campaign similar to the Michigan Economic Development Corporation with various ads promoting the concept and accomplishments of the initiative. This dovetails with the continued effort to brand MiRSAs.

Other Issues

- The reporting requirements and format were an issue to some MiRSAs. All like quarterly reporting better than monthly, but several did not like the new excel format.

Note – Since the site visits were completed the reports have been issued to MiRSAs in Word Format. They have the option of using either format.

- Particularly in the healthcare MiRSAs, there seems to be duplication on issues and projects being addressed. There is a need to promote and nurture networking between MiRSAs. Many MiRSAs are proud of their accomplishments and appreciate the opportunity to share their experience. Health Care MiRSAs are in a position to help each other primarily due to the commonality of their issues.
- Several of the conveners mentioned they are a part of too many regional initiatives.

- On a few occasions it was noted that potentially key employers or partners are not at the table. In some cases, particularly public sector, this may be part of a long-standing inter-agency issue.
- Many MiRSAs partners are too busy to attend centrally located Learning Institutes. This is particularly true with areas that have long distances to drive. Employers cannot be away for full day or two-day meetings. It was suggested piggybacking on other regional meetings. For example, there is an organization of Michigan Hospital Administrators who meet periodically, MiRSA health care events could be held to coincide with their established meetings.

Conclusions:

In general, MiRSAs established in the first round of grant funding are doing very well.

Several distinct phases of development have been identified, and MiRSAs all fall somewhere within these phases. Successful MiRSAs share similar traits. Among these traits; they were formed around a galvanizing issue, have an employer champion, there is depth of employer involvement, the convener adds value, staff is dedicated to the project, have a flexible structure, an overall understanding of the concept by all involved, and strong strategic planning. There are also pitfalls to watch out for including; lack of real benefit to employers, trying to fit projects into the MiRSA model, broadly defined issues, lack of a dedicated staff, multiple conveners, lack of clear leadership, and weak strategic planning.

Several programmatic issues were raised through the meetings and in subsequent conversations. A suggestion for funding MiRSAs in stages is primarily planning and implementation to match the phases of MiRSA development. Also, lengthening the time to respond to RFPs, or making it a continuous process. Address MiRSAs that are restructuring, and change the way success is measured to better align with the overall goals of the initiative.